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RESEARCH ARTICLE

What's in a Name? Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut's *Esprit de la renarde*: Translating Characters' Names in Historical Crime Fiction

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Abstract

This is a translation of an extract from Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut's 2009 crime novel, *L'esprit de la renarde: Une enquête du Mandarin Tân* (Spirit of the Vixen), the fifth of eight in the Mandarin Tân series of investigations carried out in 17th-century Vietnam (then called Dai Viêt). An introductory note assists in setting the scene and briefly outlining some of the translation challenges for the text, notably the range of names used in the original. These vary from the relatively exotic (Madame Liu) to the partly French (Madame Prune) and the fully French (Contemplation Retenue).

Résumé

A partir de la traduction vers l'anglais d'un extrait du polar historique de Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut, *L'esprit de la renarde: Une enquête du Mandarin Tân* (2009), le cinquième dans la série des huit romans qui suivent les aventures du Mandarin Tân dans le Viêt-Nam du XVII^e siècle, nous présentons ici quelques réflexions sur la traduction des noms propres. Nous expliquons d'abord le contexte narratif de l'extrait, pour ensuite considérer les défis posés par ce texte, où figurent des noms exotiques pour un lectorat français (tel Madame Liu), des noms déjà 'traduits' en partie vers le français (Madame Prune), et des noms entièrement francisés (Contemplation Retenue).

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Keywords

Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut, *L'esprit de la renarde*, Mandarin Tân, historical crime fiction, translation of names, le polar historique, la traduction des noms propres

Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut's historical crime fiction series is scrupulously researched and—like other examples of the sub-genre—must maintain a delicate balance between informing the reader about the context of the crimes investigated and maintaining a focus on the pursuit and bringing to justice of the criminal. This focus must at the same time remain somewhat diffuse, since no reader wants the crime solved in the opening pages: the twists and turns and obfuscations of the plot are every bit as important as its revelations.

In translating these kinds of texts, the translator must always bear in mind this need to maintain the puzzle element while at the same time making the context as 'realistic' as possible to a readership that, by definition, is not casually familiar with the time or place in which events unfold.

As will become clear on reading this extract, the chief investigator, Mandarin Tân, is something of a rebel. While he works for the Chinese imperial power within a colonised Dai-Việt, he is quick to see (and to condemn) signs of the corruption that was common practice within the system. To a large extent, Tran-Nhut uses humour to point out these failings: at the same time, a degree of formality marks the text as being of another era. While the humour invites the reader inside the circle of shared amusement and/or irony, the formality promotes a distance: another delicate balancing act that needs to be maintained in the translation.

A further challenge, very much in focus in the following extract, concerns the names of the characters. Tran Nhut uses a variety of naming practices, from Gallicised versions of Vietnamese names (Postillon Fétide, Pensées Inquiètes) where the meaning of these names has already been 'translated' into French, to combinations of title plus translated names (Madame Prune) or imported names (Madame Kitsune, from the Japanese), to combinations of title plus Vietnamese names (le Mandarin Tân, Monsieur Phi, Général Tho, Monsieur Canh, le Lettré Dinh). The result, in the original, is a multilingual mixture which, arguably, reflects the mingling of nationalities in Dai-Việt during this time period: preserving it in the translation is therefore important.

Finally, the knowledge that, as the author has stated on many occasions, the protagonist is based on one of her ancestors adds a dimension of responsibility to the translator's task: while the work is clearly fiction, like much historical writing, it has roots in a very real—and in this case, personally important—past (Tran-Nhut 2018a). In the following extract, the Mandarin is caught up in a series of cannibalistic murders and disappearances. In addition, his friend and companion Scholar Dinh, has been arrested and thrown into gaol in Faifo, suspected of the murder of an elderly woman. This town (also known as Hai Pho or Hôi An), was an important port from the 16th century onward, where Japanese, Portuguese, English, Chinese, Dutch and Indian settlers and traders mingled, and where supporters of the Trinh (Northern) and Nguyen (Southern) lords might also clash.

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Extract from *L'esprit de la renarde*¹

Beneath the midday sun the Tribunal of Faifo sat as silent as the grave. Dark shadows detached themselves from the longan trees lining the central pathway. The air vibrated with heat, making liquid pools on the white-hot sand.

An old man was walking up and down in front of the apparently deserted building. He approached the entry, his shaved head dripping with sweat, only to back away again.

To go in or not to go in? wondered the bonze Troubled Thoughts, as he dithered at the foot of the steps, eyeing them doubtfully.

Back and forth he went, chewing at his fingernails, unable to make up his mind. His wrinkled face wore an expression of doubt mingled with mistrust. The Tribunal officers' uniforms inspired in him a feeling of repulsion he couldn't set aside. Of course he couldn't actually see a great many uniforms, because apart from one foot visible in the main entrance there was no sign of anyone on watch. The Guardians of Justice must be taking a little nap, sprawled like dogs across the cool tiles of the lobby floor.

Why had he dragged his skinny carcass here, when he could have been relaxing in the shade of the great pagoda? he wondered. But it was too late now, if he were to have any peace of mind he would have to confide in one of those long drinks of water in there. Perking up at the thought, Troubled Thoughts went up a few steps. But what if they didn't believe him and suspected him instead? He would be beaten mercilessly and his poor little frail person subjected to all kinds of tortures! He stopped, quivering with fear.

Turning, he saw an officer coming toward him. He was a tall fellow with a stern expression who must strike hard when he inflicted punishment, judging by his muscular appearance. Feeling trapped, the bonze choked back a cry of distress. If he backed away, he would trip over the foot of the sleeping guard, who would be certain to give him a drubbing for interrupting his siesta. If he moved forward, he would fall into the clutches of the threatening officer who was closing in with long strides. Seized with panic, Troubled Thoughts sent up a prayer to Buddha when he saw the young man roll up his sleeves and loosen his collar.

'Don't beat me!' he squawked, raising his hands in front of his face.

'What are you going on about?' the man asked, eyebrows arched in surprise, wiping his forehead. 'I'm not in the habit of abusing old priests, unless they've committed some heinous crime.'

Eyes narrowed, he stared at Troubled Thoughts, and the monk shrank into the folds of his robe. It was all quite clear, the officer was about to seize him by the scruff of his neck and make him confess to a misdeed he hadn't committed. His gut bubbling with fear, Troubled Thoughts set about mentally composing a eulogy in his own honour.

'What have you come to the Tribunal for?' the young man asked. 'I hope it's not urgent, I think most of my colleagues are snoring their heads off. Try again when they've come to, after the smell of their evening soup has tickled their nostrils.'

And he stepped around the priest to go into the building.

Miraculously saved from a fate worse than death, Troubled Thoughts grabbed him by the sleeve.

¹ Tran-Nhut (2005: 116–134). *L'esprit de la renarde* has been translated into the Vietnamese as *Hồn Hồ Ly* (Trần Nhựt 2018b).

'No, wait! I can talk to you!' he shouted, tired of waiting.

When the official looked at him questioningly, the bonze began to spill the whole story.

'Actually, I've come to tell you about a disappearance.'

He pulled his companion away from the entry, toward a tree, and lowered his voice.

'It's about a nun I know. Her name is Quiet Contemplation and she was on her way to the Perfect Lotus convent. But she never arrived, according to the nuns who live there. I'm am afraid a great misfortune may have befallen her!'

'How do you know her?'

'We were travelling together toward Faifo. We'd had to leave Cambodia, where armed conflicts are laying waste to the country. Are you aware of the political situation there, Officer ...?'

'Tân,' the man replied evasively, gesturing to the priest to carry on.

'Well, Officer Tân, you must know that Cambodia has been in a pretty precarious situation for centuries, and that about thirty years ago the Siamese invaded the country and turned it into a vassal state. But the Khmers refused to submit, and have even recently called on the Spanish in Manila to free them from the yoke of their oppressors.'

The priest shook his bald head before explaining:

'But the plan misfired and after several bloody conflicts the Spaniards had all perished and Siam was taking back control of the territory. In any case, we priests, followers of Buddha, had to flee the country as it descended into chaos. Between internal power struggles and foreign interventions, the people there are living through very difficult times.'

'And that's why you came back to Dai-Việt with your companion?' Officer Tân asked.

The other man paused to look nervously around him. In a conspiratorial tone, he added:

'To avoid being slaughtered, yes, but mainly to warn our brothers and sisters in Việt monasteries.'

'Warn them of what?'

The old man clicked his tongue before announcing in a lecturing tone:

'The way of Buddha is under threat from new arrivals who are preaching a new religion, catholicism.'

'Yes, I'm aware of that,' Mandarin Tân interjected, nodding. 'The Jesuits have already set foot on our territory here.'

Troubled Thoughts's cheeks suddenly paled to yellow.

'I knew it! They're everywhere! They'll end up grabbing us by the folds of our robes and twisting until we swallow our prayer beads! In the Philippines, the Spanish have started spreading their beliefs among a primitive population that hadn't even heard of Buddha's teachings, and we should be fearful that these converts might soon start muscling in on more civilised places where we've built pagodas or temples.'

'Bah, there aren't many Spaniards in our country. It's the Portuguese who came en masse.'

The bonze gave a snort of terror.

'The Portuguese! The scum of the earth! Haven't you heard how they established themselves in the Moluccas, in the heart of the Islamic realm? They pretend to be traders, but at the same time they bring in priests on the sly, who convert the people. They're devious, they're hypocrites, they're depraved!'

Mandarin Tân waved a hand in a soothing gesture.

'Ah well, we all use whichever means of persuasion suits us best.'

'No, no!' squawked Troubled Thoughts. 'They happily mix trade, religion and armed force. The King of Arakan has already called on several of them to fight Myanmar and Siam. Not content with meddling in centuries-old conflicts, the foreigners are set on seizing power! Don't tell me you aren't aware that the Portuguese adventurer Felipe de Brito has taken over the port of Syriam in Myanmar! They're supposedly Catholic, but they worship only gold: they'll fight for the Siamese one day and the Cambodians the next. I don't know what their religion teaches, but they have no hesitation in going as far as the Ganges Delta in search of slaves to trade.'

Breathless from this diatribe, the bonze had to pause.

'My brothers have no idea what danger threatens them. I absolutely had to warn them.'

Troubled Thoughts surveyed the surroundings, fearful he might be overheard. He looked like a hunted rabbit in search of a clump of trees to take cover in.

'The Portuguese here are just traders,' the Mandarin tried to reassure him. 'The ones who've chosen the soldier's way are further to the west.'

'They're all the same, I tell you!' the monk insisted. 'That despicable Felipe de Brito, an insignificant deckhand who has proclaimed himself regent, has committed a most egregious act against the Buddhists of Myanmar.'

In spite of himself, the old man clenched his fists in fury.

'Do you realise that animal stole the great bell from the Shwedagon pagoda—where the eight strands of Buddha's hair are kept—with the aim of extracting the copper to make canons? And he wanted to get his hands on the precious gems that decorate it.'

Troubled Thoughts's face lit up suddenly with a satisfied smile as he concluded:

'But you don't steal from Buddha that easily. The miserable thief tied the bell to a raft behind his ship, then had to look on as it sank into the river, dragging the ship down with it. I rather think he'll soon meet with a less than enviable fate because of his evil acts.'

Pensively, Mandarin Tân looked at the monk, who had travelled so far to get back to his community, driven by rumours of war and destruction, in an attempt to rescue whatever he could of a religion and a world he held dear. Frail and wrinkled, he had braved the fatigue and dangers of the journey, despite his fearful nature.

'And your colleague Quiet Contemplation was also on her way back to warn her fellow nuns?' he asked, in a gentle tone of voice.

'That's correct. But no one was expecting her: she wasn't a member of the congregation. So I'm the only one to be concerned that she's gone missing. That poor woman left me so she could get to the convent more quickly. She was hurt, from throwing herself with fierce hunger on a prickly durian, and she wanted to get help as soon as possible. Between you and me, I think she was probably famished, it was an exhausting journey and we'd run out of food.'

Troubled Thoughts rolled the beads of his prayer necklace nervously between his parchment-dry palms.

'I do hope the Tribunal's henchmen will find her in one piece. So long as Lord Tiger hasn't made a meal of her ...'

His ears still ringing with Troubled Thoughts's lamentations, Mandarin Tân ventured into the belly of the Tribunal. He did his duty and woke up a scribe to take down the bonze's complaint, then slipped away to avoid having to listen to his stream of woes again.

After his morning in the sunshine, the cool shade of the gaol felt good. It was time to find out how Scholar Dinh was doing, probably crouched pitifully in his cell. A small soy-stuffed cake nestled in the palm of Tân's hand, destined for the prisoner accused of murder. It wasn't much, but it might give him a boost. Tân skipped down the steps, only to be brought up short.

'Let yourself go! Let it rip!' a persuasive voice was saying, trembling with excitement. 'Don't hold anything back!'

'I'm doing my best,' Scholar Dinh muttered, sounding exasperated. 'It doesn't come on command.'

'Would you like a little help?' the other voice whispered enthusiastically.

'Absolutely not! Keep your hands off!'

'Concentrate! I haven't got all afternoon!'

'I can't do it,' grunted a stubborn Dinh.

'Oh no, don't give me that! I have ways of making you ...'

'Gerraway from me!'

There was the sound of a stool tipping over, then a quiet growl of contentment and a satisfied laugh.

Intrigued, Mandarin Tân moved forward in the dark cavern. Whatever was going on in the depths of the Tribunal? Did he really want to know?

The glow of a lantern on the floor flickered over a strange scene. As Dinh hastily readjusted his clothing, his cellmate, the informer Fetid Spittle, let out a whistle of admiration.

'Not bad! That's a pretty good amount!'

Leaning over a bucket, an unknown person nodded with obvious satisfaction.

The happy band jumped when Mandarin Tân coughed discreetly.

'Oh, it's you,' mumbled the Scholar, scarlet-cheeked. 'Do you know that I've just relieved myself of a precious substance?'

'I do have some limits to my imagination,' his friend responded, icily.

'A little something to refresh you?' the stranger interjected, holding out a huge cup filled with a greenish liquid.

The Mandarin stared at him with curiosity. His smooth face was flawless, the skin looked as soft as a rain-washed peach in the morning light. He was small, with the slender ankles and wrists of a little child, which sat oddly with the silk suit he wore, cut to fit a well-built adult. Adding to the ambiguity of this character, his thickly-lashed eyes expressed both dreaminess and slyness.

'Go on, drink it all down,' the stranger cajoled him with an enchanting smile, as the Mandarin stared at him in a daze. 'You'll enjoy the citrusy flavour, believe me, Monsieur ...'

'Officer Tân,' the Mandarin replied, coming out of his trance. 'And you, you are ...?'

'Monsieur Bonheur,' he answered modestly. 'Monsieur Happiness, if you will. I'm the town doctor, and I visit the Tribunal gaols to check on the state of the prisoners.'

He bowed to the Mandarin, who returned the salutation. Tân was on the point of sipping at the liquid, whose emerald highlights were dancing before his dreamy eyes.

'If I were you, Tân, I wouldn't be swallowing any of that herbal infusion,' Scholar Dinh said calmly. 'It's a powerful diuretic that will empty your bladder faster than tamarind soup. And that's exactly what our kindly Monsieur Bonheur is after.'

The doctor gestured an almost sincere denial.

'I wouldn't dream of taking advantage of Scholar Tân's natural reserves! It merely seemed to me that with the heat outside, a little bramble-root tea would please his palate and bring him a sense of well-being.'

'That said, our friendly quack wouldn't turn up his nose at an addition to the bucket of golden fluid he came here for,' Fetid Spittle commented, adding fuel to the flames.

Monsieur Bonheur found this remark an offence against his dignity.

'I would have you know that my work is carried out in the name of science. An ex-convict like you, a blackmailer with nothing but weasel words to justify his existence, can have no idea of the medical research associated with human urine.'

He turned to Mandarin Tân, who struck him as being more likely to understand the importance of his ideas than Fetid Spittle, who was slouching back against the mouldy wall, his face creased into a disrespectful sneer.

'Appearances to the contrary, my aim is not to carry out some sick, random collection of urine. In fact I'm working to refine the famous *ch'iu shih*, or *autumn mineral*, a Chinese remedy of the greatest importance. It so happens that two barrels of the height of a man are needed to produce a few ounces of this mineral.'

'And you're reduced to seeking the cooperation of prisoners?' asked Dinh, still saddened by his recent, unwilling contribution to science.

'I take whatever I can get! If common decency allowed, I'd go door to door, but I've struck a high level of resistance from the locals.'

'Well, it is something ... shall we say, private,' Dinh objected.

Monsieur Bonheur shook his head.

'If that were all ...'

'What do you mean?' asked the Mandarin, in surprise.

The quack was already explaining:

'The Chinese began investigating the beneficial properties of the white crystals extracted from urine nearly two thousand years back. In a poem dating from several centuries ago, there's an allusion to this extraordinary product, but it's only recently that recipes for *autumn mineral* have been published.'

'I bet it's a sexual cure,' Fetid Spittle said, scratching his crotch. 'That's the only thing that motivates quacks.'

Monsieur Bonheur's dignified tone seemed somewhat forced.

'*Autumn mineral* can cure sterility, by stimulating the physiological processes of the reproductive organs—not by sharpening a lustful, base impulse. I'm not trying to develop one of those vulgar love potions for coupling that the people you're in the habit of blackmailing clamour for.'

'You mentioned crystallisation,' Mandarin Tân interrupted. 'Does that mean it was the Taoists, working away with their furnaces, who perfected the collection method for the mineral?'

'Of course they were the ones who first began the tests. The alchemists of days gone by were remarkable experimenters who made huge advances in medicine, although some people keep on denying this.'

‘They were sorcerers, you mean,’ Mandarin Tân, an opponent of those free spirits who refused to be a part of the social fabric, could not help but comment.

Absorbed in his discussion, Monsieur Bonheur paid no attention to Tân.

‘You’d be surprised by the uses of the mineral. It serves in the treatment of flagging virility, but also in the case of sex changes and even hermaphroditism.’

‘I’ve never blackmailed a hermaphrodite,’ Fetid Spittle murmured thoughtfully. ‘Some interesting possibilities there.’

Carried away by his thoughts, Monsieur Bonheur raised a learned finger in the air.

‘It is also used to stimulate beard growth. Did you know that the development of facial hair is directly proportional to testicle size?’

This statement, made with great frankness, created a pause in the conversation, during which the three other men discreetly contemplated the quack’s smooth cheeks.

‘This is all very much concerned with things sexual,’ Dinh said, to break a silence that had become embarrassing.

‘Of course,’ Monsieur Bonheur acknowledged. ‘And that’s why we distinguish between men’s and women’s urine. All the research is based on that difference.’

His eyes shining with enthusiasm, he looked at his audience.

‘The best specialists are working at this very moment on all the possible variations. There’s to be a particularly important conference soon in China, where the leading researchers will present their latest results. After all, it’s a field with a great deal of promise, not just from a medical point of view, but also for the economy!’

‘But it’s just urine!’ Mandarin Tân protested, pulling a face. ‘What do you mean by “variations”?’

Delighted by this objection, which gave him the chance to expand on his favourite theme, Monsieur Bonheur explained:

‘Open your eyes! The composition of the urine is of prime importance. It possesses different qualities depending on whether it comes from a child or a dog, for example. Might this precious liquid vary in composition depending on the country it comes from, the North or the South, or the degree of corpulence of the person who produces it? And that’s just a few of the fascinating aspects of the question.’

He stroked his smooth chin, with regret.

‘I’ve tried to keep up with research in the field. But it must be admitted that we are a long way behind China.’

Monsieur Bonheur paused to cast a desolate glance at the near-empty bucket.

‘The chief difficulty is the collecting,’ he concluded, somewhat sadly. ‘Such a large quantity is needed for the experiments ...’

As none of his companions spoke, not wishing to raise the disappointed doctor’s hopes, he picked up his bucket slowly and wished them good day. He paused in the doorway, reluctant to leave, and turned toward Mandarin Tân, offering him the cup of bramble-root tea.

‘Officer Tân, are you sure you don’t want this deliciously refreshing beverage?’

As Monsieur Bonheur’s footsteps faded away on the stairs, Mandarin Tân sighed noisily.

‘What a strange obsession for someone who seems so normal otherwise!’

'He's a strange fellow,' Dinh agreed, rolling his eyes in exasperation. 'He turns up here with his damned drink and then off he goes with your amber essence!'

'But what he said opens up unthought-of possibilities,' Fetid Spittle murmured, with a dreamy look. 'I could make money not just from adulterers and sexual deviants, but from people with unsettled sexual identities ... Now there's an idea ...'

He rubbed at his groin and leaned back into a corner to consider his potential new activities.

The Mandarin pulled up a stool and sat down facing Dinh, who was eating the soy cake with great enjoyment.

'While I was sacrificing my body in a dark, dank gaol, what were you up to, out there in the fresh air?' the Scholar asked between mouthfuls.

'I managed to question the son of the woman you savagely butchered. He's a brutish fellow by the name of Monsieur Phi, who practises extortion, plain and simple, down in the market. He's totally convinced it was you who did it, but I was able to extract a few bits of information from him. It appears the old lady had been invited by her brother, Monsieur Canh's father, to a banquet a few days before she died.'

He watched his friend wolfing down the cake as if he had eaten nothing for days.

'You'll have to go and question her brother, then. Be quick about it, I've had enough of rotting away down here in this stinking hole with dubious company.'

'That was my intention precisely,' the Mandarin replied, stretching out his legs. 'But on my way back to the Tribunal, I was intercepted by a bonze who'd come to register the disappearance of a nun he was travelling back from Cambodia with.'

'He must be the one who killed her,' Dinh declared firmly. 'It's a long journey and he couldn't stand always being together, so he tried to violate her. She resisted, so after he took her virginity he took her life. It's the classic story of a randy monk lusting after an appetisingly plump nun, you know what I mean.'

The Mandarin couldn't help laughing. Dinh always did have a one-track mind.

'Except the monk is nearly seventy years old. Before he could violate a nun he'd need his equipment to be in working order.'

'Not necessarily,' said Dinh, his mouth full, sticking to his guns. 'Monsieur Bonheur's *autumn mineral* might be able to waken dormant impulses. No one is spared those murky, unspeakable desires that lurk in the heart ...'

His friend sighed. Best to leave Scholar Dinh to rehash his grubby theories, if that's what he wanted to do.

'Anyway, the old nun is missing in action. Still, that will only make one hundred and twenty-five cases not solved by the zealous officers of this Tribunal.'

'One more disappearance, and still no solution in sight.'

The Mandarin and the Scholar turned. Fetid Spittle had emerged at last from his professional musings.

'How do you know that?' asked Mandarin Tân.

'They're not terribly good with disappearances, haven't you noticed? Last year a painter disappeared without leaving the slightest trace, and he was never found. At one point, people were even wondering if he'd maybe wound up on The Gourmet's plate.'

'Why would they think that?'

Fetid Spittle massaged his neck.

‘Well, that painter vanished just a few days before the four teenagers who did come to a sad end in The Gourmet’s soup bowl.’

The sun had slunk behind pewter-coloured clouds by the time the Mandarin emerged from the underground prison. Gusts of wind snapped at the fringed pennants over the entrance to the Tribunal and blew away the birds that had come to feast on the red ants in the trees shading the courtyard. Revived by the coolness, he sat for a moment beneath a quivering longan tree, whose leaves fluttered away like drifting thoughts.

His hair whipped by the squalls, Mandarin Tân felt as if his mind was in disarray too. Never before had he felt so helpless. Incapable of asserting justice as the Emperor’s emissary, and forced to maintain a pretense here in the enemy South, bound hand and foot by that dratted Dinh who had got himself into desperate straits, he was in a very difficult situation.

There were too many additional factors in Madame Prune’s death. He was aware that the case was top priority, because Dinh’s life depended on it, but he couldn’t help being intrigued by these unsolved disappearances which were apparently blamed on a cannibal called The Gourmet. As a magistrate himself, he found it hard to accept that the local Mandarin had left judicial matters in such a neglected state. A year with no conclusive results, for murders that were clearly claimed by the killer! Of course, the facts were disconcerting—people vanished into thin air, young men were cut into pieces, old ladies’ severed limbs were found. But it was precisely these strange aspects that tickled Mandarin Tân’s curiosity, making him want to come to grips with these dark mysteries. His intellect yearned for enigmas, longed to launch itself into these obscure questions, and his sense of justice urged him on, to confront the culprit at any price. If only he had more time!

But the pathetic image of Scholar Dinh being led away to be tortured after multiple beatings brought him back to reality. Mandarin Châu, that oh-so-worthy representative of Lord Nguyễn, had ideas about punishment that brought his colleagues into dishonour. Whenever he was unable to hunt out the real evildoers, who ran riot with impunity, he took it out shamelessly on those who had been thrown into prison on the basis of rumours and false information. Poor Dinh would be hanged or quartered before the week was out, tortured as an example to others and put on show as proof of the unworthy magistrate’s great power. Mandarin Tân slapped his thigh: there was no time to waste! If he could prove his friend’s innocence quickly, perhaps he could untangle the other cases too, before Mandarin Châu returned ...

Reassured by his decision, he concentrated on the clues he had gathered concerning Madame Prune. Her son, that poxy, arrogant Monsieur Phi, had mentioned a family dinner not long before she died. If there were crucial elements to be revealed from that evening, they might throw some welcome light on a possible defence of the incriminated Scholar. In any case, it was the only trail he had for the moment.

He stood up, looking toward the office of the acting head of the Tribunal. In the falling darkness, he saw no light in the room. Too bad, he didn’t have enough time to go and question him anyway. He would go directly to the man’s father’s house in search of answers.